



Assessing Lives, Giving Supernaturalism Its Due, and Capturing Naturalism : Reply to 13 Critics of Meaning in Life

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Assessing Lives, Giving Supernaturalism Its Due, and Capturing Naturalism

Reply to 13 Critics of *Meaning in Life*

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1. Introduction

It is astonishing to encounter in this special issue of the *Journal of Philosophy of Life* more than 225 pages of critical discussion of my book *Meaning in Life: An Analytic Study* (a précis of which can be found elsewhere in this volume). To make my reply to this great amount of penetrating thought manageable, and to make it readable, I have elected to focus on three overarching themes that capture a large majority of the analysis.

One recurrent issue is how to assess a life, or how to understand meaning as a value-theoretic category. In *Meaning in Life* I do so by: evaluating the lives of *individuals*, not of the human race as a whole; contending that a life has two *dimensions* by which to exhibit meaning, in terms of its parts and in terms of it as a whole; *comparing* lives from outside their first-personal standpoints and ranking them with judgments such as that one life has more meaning in it than another; and seeking out at least some *universal* claims about meaning, ones that apply to all human persons and not merely those in a particular country or society. In this volume, Peter Baumann, Masahiro Morioka, James Tartaglia, Hasko von Kriegstein and Sho Yamaguchi have particularly been the ones to question these facets of my approach to assessing the meaning in people's lives, which concern mainly part one of the book.

A second salient theme in this issue has to do with the status of supernaturalism, the general view that God or a soul, as normally construed in the monotheist tradition, is necessary for meaning in life. With regard to supernaturalism, in the book I argue that: an *immortality requirement is implausible*, i.e., a life that will end is compatible with there being meaning in it; the most influential instance of supernaturalism, *purpose theory*, is *questionable*

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because it is incompatible with the best motivation for holding any supernaturalism; and most *supernaturalists hold incoherent beliefs* at an implicit level. Here, Jason Poettcker, Nicholas Waghorn and Fumitake Yoshizawa take issue with my defences of these positions, which appear in part two of *Meaning in Life*.

The third topic that stands out in the contributions concerns which physical features of a life confer meaning on it, supposing a naturalist approach is broadly correct. In my work, I contend that they: are essentially constituted by the *deliberate* exercise of intelligence; are *deontological* in the sense of not being solely a function of long-term desirable consequences that a life produces; and include positive engagement with the *fundamental* features of human existence, at least when the meaning is great. Christopher Ketcham, Minao Kukita, David Matheson, Mark Wells and Yu Urata have provided prima facie reason to doubt these facets of my favoured understanding of the nature of meaning in life, advanced in part three of my book.

In the following I naturally see what there is to be said in defence of my views as initially expressed in *Meaning in Life*. However, I hope the reader finds that I do not do so in a defensive way. I have appreciated the opportunity to reconsider so many core claims of the book, and I am pleased to admit where I need to reflect still more on them and where I need to change them.

If one of the key claims of the book still seems true, namely, that searching for what makes a life meaningful is itself a source of meaning, then it is apt for me to express gratitude to the contributors to, and the editor of, this volume for having conferred some meaning on my life. They have continued—indeed, broadened—the search with me.

2. Assessing Lives

In this section I address what one might call “pre-theoretic” or “methodological” issues. Here, critics raise queries not about what, if anything, can make anyone’s life more meaningful (which sections 3 and 4 address), but instead about whether that sort of question is even appropriate to seek to answer, at least in the way that I do in the book. In 2.1 below, I reply to the objection that enquiry into meaning is properly understood as being about the life of the species, not the lives of individuals. In 2.2, I respond to the claim that the meaning in a life inheres merely in its parts, not also the life as a whole. In 2.3, I

deal with arguments that meaning is not (very) comparable, as opposed to admits of comparison between periods of a life and even between lives. In 2.4, I rebut criticisms that my methods are incompatible with striving for a principle that might obtain warrant for having a universal scope.

2.1. Which Life Matters Most?

The title of my book, *Meaning in Life*, was meant to signify that I was not addressing what some others have in mind with talk of the meaning “of” life. I have been strictly interested in what, if anything, would confer meaning on the life of a given person, what would put more meaning into her life, not what might confer meaning on human life as such. However, James Tartaglia argues in his contribution that the latter issue is where the action is and what philosophers should be addressing.

His article is a robust challenge to the analytic approach taken towards life’s meaning not only by myself, but also by a majority of those currently writing in English on the topic. His implicit view is that I should not have published *Meaning in Life*, for a wide array of reasons, including that it does not address a truly philosophical topic and threatens to direct the field away from one that is.

Why does Tartaglia maintain that seeking to answer the question of what (in the physical world) makes a given person’s life meaningful, which he calls “social meaning”, is not really philosophical? He writes that my posing the

question about social meaning, however, could occur to anyone trying to figure out what to do with their life. Only in a tenuous sense could the essentially practical question of “how to get more meaning in my life” be construed as philosophical; and most people ask this question without getting into philosophical analysis (2015: 95).

I see three distinct suggestions here. One is that anyone trying to ascertain what to do with her life might readily pose the question of what would make her life meaningful. It is very hard for me to see why that should mean that the question is not philosophical. After all, the question of what counts as happiness or as moral wrongness or as justified belief “could occur to anyone trying to figure out what to do” with her life; does Tartaglia believe these also fail to count as philosophical questions?

A second suggestion is that most people address the question of what makes their lives meaningful “without getting into philosophical analysis”. I am not sure that this empirical claim is true. But if it is true, then, again, the same is true of happiness, wrongness and justification; after all, few people are acquainted with philosophical methods, ideas and texts. The fact that most might opt for answers from religious sources or self-help books does not mean philosophy is not relevant.

Tartaglia’s third, and most powerful, suggestion is that asking what would confer meaning on a particular life is “essentially practical”, whereas philosophical questions are not. For a third time, I make a “partners in guilt” argument in reply. Questions such as whether one should believe anything on faith (as opposed to live by evidentialism), whether one can have good reason to perform immoral actions, and how to act so as to avoid injustice are essentially practical, but would be deemed philosophical by most self-described “philosophers”.

Indeed, note that Tartaglia’s own article is largely making a practical point, but I presume that he considers it to be a work of philosophy nonetheless. He maintains that my approach “should not be held up as the Holy Grail” (2015: 103) and that “philosophers interested in either the meaning of life or social meaning should remain in Camelot”, i.e., should not go seeking for what might unify the good, the true and the beautiful as variable sources of meaning in people’s lives (2015: 109). If Tartaglia deems his article to be philosophical despite drawing conclusions about what philosophers *should do* with their time (viz., don’t publish books like Metz’s), then, by analogy, it seems apt to deem my book to be philosophical even though it draws conclusions about what people should do with their lives.

Finally, although asking about whether and how a particular life might be meaningful is *more* practical than asking whether and how the life of the species might be meaningful, I deny that it is *thoroughly* practical. In fact, in the book I contended in several places that it is not (e.g., 2013: 68-69, 141-142, 147-150, 241). My position in *Meaning in Life* was that talk of meaning in people’s lives is by definition about a final value, where people’s choices might not be able to bring it about, either because, à la the nihilist, the world is structured so that meaning is available to no one, or because, my favoured view, sometimes people lack the requisite mental, social or material resources to realize it. “Although it is correct that meaning comes in degrees, that it varies within a life and also

between lives, and that we have pro tanto reason to seek more of it rather than less, these claims are consistent with the view that meaning is at bottom *evaluative* rather than *normative*.... (M)eaning is basically a *good* rather than a *should*” (Metz 2013: 142).

In sum, the question I pose about meaning in a life is not essentially practical, in the sense of exhaustively being about which choices people should make, and, even if it were, that would be insufficient to disqualify it as a philosophical topic (on pain of at least disqualifying Tartaglia’s own article as well). Consider, now, Tartaglia’s bold claim more directly:

(T)o ask whether the human species has a meaning is to ask the question of the meaning of life.... Rather than there being three topics “readily placed under the rubric of ‘the meaning of life’”, then – i.e. the meanings of my life, the species, and the universe – it seems to me that the situation is as follows. There is one question of the meaning of life (i.e. the human species) (2015: 94).

This point is trivially true if one distinguishes between questions about the meaning “of” life from those about meaning “in” life; Tartaglia’s point is rather that only the former is a genuine philosophical question.

However, Tartaglia’s own diagnosis of the field provides strong reason to doubt his narrow construal of meaning-talk. He points out that philosophers such as Nietzsche and Sartre “did not think there was a meaning of life, and hence sought to investigate how people can build up positive social meaning in a world without God. That is what the 20th century discourse of ‘authenticity’ concerned” (2015: 98-99; see also 97). I agree. This point is evidence in favour of my view that there are at least two distinct philosophical questions one can sensibly pose about life’s meaning, whether the human species has a meaning and how a given individual might be able to exhibit meaning in her life (even if the species as a whole lacks meaning).

Most post-war philosophers working in the Anglo-American tradition have followed Nietzsche’s and Sartre’s lead in letting go of the search for a meaning “of” human life as such and instead considering what meaning might be available “in” particular lives and, more often than not, from within a purely

physical world.¹ That is, a majority have been what I call “naturalists”, maintaining that meaning is to be found in a purely physical world, with much of the debate being about whether meaning in life is subjective or objective and which particular version of these broad views is most defensible.

There are occasions in his article when Tartaglia does not maintain that there is no distinct philosophical issue of meaning in life, and instead is inclined to grant that there is one or that a case could be made for one (2015: 98, 102). Here, Tartaglia maintains that one cannot philosophize well about meaning in life without first exploring the meaning of life, and hence without engaging in the rich Continental literature devoted to the latter (2015: 94, 96, 98-99; cf. Urata 2015: 222). I believe that is true in one sense, but false in another.

To make my point, I need to draw some distinctions. First, consider a distinction about the *object of analysis*, i.e., whether one is interested in the meaningfulness of (a) the human species as a whole or (b) particular human persons. Second, consider a distinction regarding the *source of meaning* for the relevant object, that is, whether one is interested in meaning insofar as it is conferred by (c) something beyond the human, physical realm or (d) something within it.

Now, when Tartaglia speaks of meaning “of” life he is combining (a) and (c), and strictly contrasting it with the combination of (b) and (d), which concerns “social meaning” in his terms. His construal of the debate glosses the possibility of an orthogonal combination between the two distinctions, viz., between (b) and (c), and it is precisely such a combination that is at the core of not only my project in *Meaning in Life*, but also much recent English-speaking philosophical literature on life’s meaning.

My enquiry was never meant to be restricted to (b) and (d). I intended to restrict myself solely to (b), and not to address (a), but to be open to the idea that the source of meaning in (b) could come from either (c) or (d) or both. In other words, I, with a large majority of other analytic philosophers, have been interested in knowing what might make the lives of particular individuals more or less meaningful, and I have been interested in whether the meaning might come from something supernatural or natural or both.

So, I believe Tartaglia is right that in order to answer the question of whether a particular life is meaningful, one must ask *about (c)*, e.g., whether God is

¹ Notice that the psychological literature in the post-war era, which Tartaglia chides me for neglecting, has also overwhelmingly focused on “meaning in life”, on which see Ebersole and DeVore (1995: 41).

necessary for any of our lives to have meaning in them. That is why I spend the entire second part of the book enquiring into the merits and demerits of supernaturalism. The reader will note that I conclude that God's existence could enhance meaning in our lives insofar as we, say, love Him, but that we could exhibit meaning in them even if He did not exist (Metz 2013: 158-160).

But that does not mean that the *combination of (a) and (c)* must be considered in order to address (b). In fact, *this* combination appears logically irrelevant to being able to answer any question about (b). Questions about (b) are, as I articulate at the start of the book (Metz 2013: 4-6; see also 62-63), about whether an individual's life has more meaning in it at a given period than at another and about whether it has more meaning in it on balance than another's life. It is essentially about meaning insofar as it can *vary* over the course of a life and between lives. But posing a question about (a), whether human life as a whole is meaningful, is essentially to ask about an *invariant* sort of meaning, where if one person's life is meaningful to a certain degree, then, necessarily, so is another's by virtue of membership in the human species (cf. Tartaglia 2015: 93).

Hence, I do not think that I am the one guilty of "conflation" (Tartaglia 2015: 92, 96), for instance when I consider whether God is necessary for any one of our lives to be meaningful and, if so, how to relate to Him so as to secure more meaning rather than less. It is perfectly coherent to ask whether, for instance, our lives are meaningful merely to the varying degree that we as individuals succeed in fulfilling His purpose or in getting to Heaven where we meet Him. And it is false to contend that "any philosopher who thinks God endows our lives with meaning is talking about the traditional question" of whether the human species has meaning (Tartaglia 2015: 95). Leo Tolstoy wants to know how he can get to Heaven (1884: 18); Robert Nozick wants to know how he can connect in the right way to an unlimited, all-encompassing God (1981: 606-608); John Cottingham wants to know whether he will partake of the good, the true and the beautiful as constituted by God's mind (2003, 2005); and then monotheistic people by and large want to know how they (as distinct from the species as a whole) can obey God commandments (cf. Metz 2013: 77).

There are many other criticisms of my book amongst the buckshot of Tartaglia's article, and I lack the space to address them all, having taken up what I consider the most important ones. I close by addressing a final concern, that my book suggests that "both the continental literature and traditional question

are somewhat tangential, and can be safely ignored by those who are really serious about the ‘meaning of life’” (2015: 100; see also 102).²

In reply, for one, as I have worked to clarify in this section, I believe that there are simply two different sorts of enquiry with regard to life’s meaning, that about human life as such and that about particular human lives. I elected to focus on the latter in *Meaning in Life*, and did not mean to disparage the former.

For another, there is *of course* relevant and worthwhile material in the Continental tradition and in other ones, too, including the African, the Confucian and the Buddhist. I tried in the book to explain that I was focusing on Anglo-American literature because I needed to “obtain focus and to make my task manageable” (2013: 9) as well as because that literature “is large enough to work through and evaluate on its own” (2013: 9). It is unfortunate that these remarks did not register. *Meaning in Life* stands at 130,000 words; I found more than enough in a certain body of scholarship, which tends to share certain presuppositions, to keep me busy. Meanwhile, several others had already addressed Continental thinkers on the topic of life’s meaning in book-length discussions (e.g., Singer 1996; Belliotti 2001; and especially Young 2003).

I naturally acknowledge that a more comprehensive analysis, one more likely to ground any strong claim to universal validity, would take up cross-cultural engagements, ones that I have begun in earnest in other works since the publication of *Meaning in Life* (e.g., Metz 2014a, 2014b, 2014c, 2015a, 2015b). Indeed, much of the point of my helping to produce the present special issue of the *Journal of Philosophy of Life* was precisely to encourage dialogue between Anglo-American perspectives and others, particularly from East Asia.

2.2. *Where Is the Meaning in a Life?*

To speak of a “life’s” being meaningful is vague. What is a life, and which aspects of a life can have meaning or lack it? In the third chapter of *Meaning in Life* I address one facet of these queries, concerning whether it is the parts of a life, or life as a whole, or both that can be meaningful. My answer is the latter, “impure” or “mixed” view, according to which there are two independent dimensions by which to appraise a life, roughly, in terms of particular

² In 2.4 below, I address one more of Tartaglia’s many objections, regarding whether a view of linguistic reference that I advance undercuts the chance of making a universally valid claims about the nature of meaning.

spatio-temporal slices, whether they be actions, projects or even more attitudinal ways of approaching the world, on the one hand, and how the slices are patterned over the life as a whole, on the other.

Hasko von Kriegstein contends that my arguments for a mixed view are too quick, and that a pure part-life view is still to be taken seriously. He temptingly suggests that since my discussion of the whole-life dimension is by my own lights sketchy in *Meaning in Life*, the overall contribution made there could be seen as more complete, were I simply to drop adherence to such a dimension.

Furthermore, a chunk of von Kriegstein's strategy is to appeal to some of my own claims against me; I acknowledge in the book that there are often relational dimensions to what makes something meaningful (2013: 34-35, 66-68, 210, 218, 221), and von Kriegstein ingeniously contends that upon careful consideration of them, one need not appeal to the *largest* relational context, viz., between all the parts within a whole-life, in order to account for the intuitive presence of meaning in the cases I discuss. "(I)f a part of my life can be (and typically is) meaningful in virtue of its relational properties, what reason is there to reject a pure part-life view of the bearers of meaning? After all, we could simply say that the bearers of meaning are always parts of a life but that these parts are sometimes meaningful in virtue of their relations to other parts" (von Kriegstein 2015: 7); there is no need to posit the whole itself as something that can be meaningful.

This move is powerful, and is indeed one that I neglected in the book. Upon reflection, I am inclined to think that von Kriegstein's strategy is successful, or at least promising, for many cases, for instance that of posthumous meaning (von Kriegstein 2015: 14). However, to keep things succinct and to push the debate forward, I focus on cases in which it does not look so promising, and where it instead appears that a whole-life dimension, or something approximating it, most easily entails that, and best explains why, there is meaning intuitively present.

Consider first the issue of repetition in a life. Part of what accounts for the lack of meaning in the case of Sisyphus, as well as in lives spent in prison or on an assembly line, is the lack of variety. As von Kriegstein notes, it is not merely the likely boredom that I contend accounts for the lack of meaning; it is also the fact of sameness in the content of the activities undertaken over time. In reply, von Kriegstein is inclined to bite the bullet. "Would we really want to say of a doctor who spends her entire life curing malaria without ever getting bored or

blasé about it that her life would have been more meaningful if instead she had invested some of her time in other meaningful activities (such as appreciating exquisite art or, even, curing yellow fever)?" (von Kriegstein 2015: 10-11).

I myself am inclined towards a different view about the case of curing yellow fever. In addition, a doctor who learns from the process of treating malaria and finds, say, cheaper ways to do so would, it seems to me, have more meaning than one who stuck with same treatment time after time.

However, there is a deep point to be made on von Kriegstein's behalf with the case of appreciating art. In the book I suggested that a life with variety has some (*pro tanto*) more meaning in it than one with repetition. But appreciating art and discovering a new treatment for malaria would be comparably effective ways for von Kriegstein's malaria doctor to avoid repetition and introduce variety into her life. Indeed, the former might have more in its favour on this score. And so what von Kriegstein has probably shown is that it is not variety *as such* that is a plausible candidate for enhancing meaning. At this stage it appears to be development or advancement (or perhaps creativity, as per Richard Taylor 1987) that is key; and these bode well for the view that a whole-life can bear meaning.

One sort of development or advancement is redemption, which Charles Taylor, for one, appeals to as evidence in favour of a whole-life dimension to meaning. He remarks, "We want our lives to have meaning, or weight, or substance, or to grow towards some fullness... But this means our whole lives. If necessary, we want the future to 'redeem' the past, to make it part of a life story which has sense or purpose, to take it up in a meaningful unity" (1989: 50).

Against this, von Kriegstein points out that redemption can occur within a less-than-whole stretch of a life, or perhaps even in two parts of a life (as distinct from any stretch), and need not be a function of the whole. In *Meaning in Life* I considered the case of a young woman who had engaged in prostitution to feed a drug addiction but who eventually became a counsellor to help others avoid such a lifestyle. In contrast to the case of variety above, von Kriegstein grants there is meaning to be accounted for here, but makes two objections to the idea that it is a whole-life that does the work.

First, and most boldly, von Kriegstein contends that it is plausible to think that "the additional meaning in cases like this inheres in both the redeemed and redeeming parts rather than in the pattern itself" (2015: 13). His thought is that it

is the *period of being an addicted prostitute* that becomes less meaningless when it causes (or otherwise figures into the production of) something good, and that it is the *period of being a counsellor* that is arguably more meaningful if it was caused by something bad. Such a view contrasts with a whole-life view according to which it is the *pattern*, the *relationship* between the periods, that is meaningful.

It can be a difficult matter to choose between these two descriptions of what bears meaning. Is something, say, an *action* meaningful in virtue of its relational properties such as its effects, on the one hand? Or is a *relation* meaningful in virtue of its relata such as an action and its effects, on the other? von Kriegstein is maintaining that the former would invariably suffice, or at least does so in the redemption case.

I agree that one sensibly could evaluate the periods of life as separate bearers of meaning. It is not unreasonable to focus on the period of being an addicted prostitute and then to judge it to be somewhat less meaningless in virtue of its relational properties, specifically, the good ones they brought about in the future. The issue is whether such an approach *exhausts* the sort of judgment that we are inclined to make and without apparent mistake.

When I put myself in the shoes of the counsellor and look back on my life, I do not merely think of the two periods of my life and then add them together, which is all that I should do if von Kriegstein's approach were sound. I do not *first* think of the period of being an addicted prostitute, noting that it caused me to become a counsellor, and *then* think of the period of being a counsellor, noting that it was caused by having been an addicted prostitute, and *finally* aggregate the two periods for an overall assessment of meaning.

I could do that, but it is not all that I am inclined to do. In the *first* instance, in fact, I instead attend to the pattern, the story. Looking back, I ascribe a certain value to the narrative properties of having undergone something undesirable but then having struggled to make something desirable come of it. Of course, I might be "in the grip of a theory", making my judgment idiosyncratic; the more that fellow readers are inclined to judge similarly, though, the more evidence that such judgment is part and parcel of philosophical reflection on meaning in life.

At this point von Kriegstein's second objection arises, which is to grant that there is meaning *in the pattern* here, but to deny that the pattern must extend over the entire life. "The fact that we are able to talk about the meaning of these

two parts and the pattern connecting them, without knowing anything else about our protagonist's life, seems a fair indication that it is not her whole life that bears the meaning in question but simply these two episodes" (von Kriegstein 2015: 13).

His point about this particular redemption case is fair. And I do not necessarily want to press talk of a "whole-life" too literally (cf. Metz 2013: 52). The key point I wanted to make in the book was to deny that slivers of space-time are the sole bearers of meaning. I had in mind utilitarians, for instance, who would maintain that the meaningfulness of a life is simply a function of the degree to which one's actions have fulfilled people's preferences. I agree that pulling a child out of the way from on-coming traffic can confer meaning on one's life, regardless of whatever else happens in one's life. What I deny is that evaluating meaning in life is merely a matter of totting up the desire satisfaction produced by all one's actions *seriatim*. So long as large stretches of a life are agreed to be able to bear some meaning, the most crucial claim from the book would stand.

However, there is more to be said that still leads me to think that a life as a whole can be a relevant, and perhaps even an important, bearer of meaning. For one, if one grants that some relationships between parts of a life can bear meaning, then "the camel's nose is inside the tent", by which I mean that there is little reason to deny that the relationships between parts over the entire life could also do so. I presume part of what makes an (auto)biography first-rate is the fact that it views all later stages of a life as a function of childhood (think "Rosebud" from *Citizen Kane*), or shows how all major stages have progressed from each other (analogous to the way spirit develops in Hegel's system). If a story about someone's life can be valuable in virtue of a whole-life perspective, presumably the whole-life that the story is about could be, too.

For another, since having composed *Meaning in Life* I have begun thinking more systematically about the distinction that some have drawn between "ultimate" and other, more "partial" or "incomplete" kinds of meaning (Nozick 1981: 599; Cooper 2003: 126-142; Bennett-Hunter 2014; Waghorn 2014). I did not give the distinction any weight in the book, but have been considering whether that was to neglect something important for thought about meaning in life (Metz 2016a, unpublished). One key idea is that for any meaningful facet of a life, it would be more meaningful if (several argue that it would be meaningful *at all only if*) it were related to something else in one's life that is meaningful,

and that the latter meaningful condition would in turn be more meaningful if related to something else meaningful, and so on until one has a view of how all the meaningful conditions of one's entire life could be interconnected. A good candidate for an ultimate kind of meaning in a life would be for it to include a chain of meaningful conditions throughout it as a whole. Or, returning to Charles Taylor's comments, an ultimate kind of meaning would plausibly be constituted by a constant development towards self-realization or by one's life forming a comprehensive unity.

Supposing I am in a position to look back on my life when on my deathbed, I hope I will be able to detect some kind of big picture. I would like to see a forest and not merely trees, not even just ones apprehended to be in causal or spatial relationships with one another. Am I alone in having such a wish?

2.3. Can One Compare Meaning between Lives?

In my work, I routinely compare the degrees of meaning intuitively to be found in two different courses of action, e.g., becoming a worker in a caring profession seems to promise much more meaning than electing to count blades of grass. I also compare the amount of meaning to be found in earlier and later periods of a life, e.g., my middle aged life as a thinker, teacher, lover and father is much more meaningful than it was when I was a depressed teenager dependent on drugs and doing what he could to skip school. Still more, I compare the extent to which entire lives have been meaningful, deeming Einstein's life to have been more meaningful than mine.

Such judgments are a function of two key elements. For one, I often take an external perspective on the (part of the) life, which means that, when judging, I am neither the one living it at the time, nor working within the viewpoint of the one whose life it is. For another, I rank (aspects of) lives, and do so not merely ordinally, such that I make some roughly quantified appraisals about how much meaning there is in them.

Masahiro Morioka and Minao Kukita reject any kind of external evaluation, while Peter Baumann accepts it but denies that it admits of much systematicity when it comes to assessing degrees of meaning between lives. In the following, I defend an external standpoint as a relevant approach to assessing lives, and then say more than I did in *Meaning in Life* about the respects in which one can judge the extent to which lives have meaning in them.

Morioka carefully and thoroughly articulates an approach to evaluating meaning in life that differs dramatically from the one I and the overwhelming majority of Anglo-American philosophers employ. In the first instance, his approach is strictly internal or first-personal, a matter of asking the individual whether she deems her life to be meaningful. In addition, it is what one might label “presentist”, for it asks a person to judge whether her life is meaningful as it is, and not whether it was meaningful, could be or will be. Still more, Morioka’s method is binary, rather than gradient; that is, one is to pose the question of whether one’s actual life is meaningful, not how much meaning is in it. Morioka calls the combination of an internal, presentist and binary judgment of meaning in one’s life “the heart of meaning in life”, which, as he points out, “transcends all comparisons” (2015: 60).

I am inclined to think that this standpoint could well be of some use when thinking about meaning. I find it strongly analogous to asking whether one has a headache. Asking whether one has a headache is of course perfectly appropriate, and would provide a certain understanding of what kind of state one is in and what one should do in light of it. Similarly, it is sensible to pose the question of whether one’s actual life is meaningful, and the answer one gives could be revealing and action-guiding.

However, I seriously doubt the much stronger claims that Morioka sometimes makes for the relevance of “the heart of meaning in life”. He maintains that “the heart of meaning in life” is the key vantage point by which to evaluate meaning.

Alas, does my life like this have any meaning at all? I believe that what is asked or lamented in the above question constitutes the very central content of meaning in life.... And we should note that throughout his book, Metz never talks about “the heart of meaning in life.” From my viewpoint, Metz fails to discuss the most important aspect of meaning in life in his academic discussion of this topic (Morioka 2015: 55, 56).

Although Morioka acknowledges that it can be coherent to adopt an external or non-presentist or gradient approach to issues of life’s meaning (2015: 57, 59), and although he does not quite say that only “the heart of meaning in life” is valid (but see 2015: 59), his claim is that the latter is to be much preferred to the former.

Similarly, Kukita writes, “I want no one to judge my life to be meaningless. Nor would I judge any other person’s life to be meaningless, or arrange other people’s lives in order of how meaningful they are.... I cannot share the assumption that one can compare meaningfulness across people’s lives” (2015: 212).

I have not encountered a strictly noncomparative approach to life’s meaning before, so that Morioka’s and Kukita’s claim that it is key is original for all I know, relative to an English-speaking audience. In the following, I focus mainly on Morioka’s discussion, as his text suggests an argument for this strong claim.

At one point Morioka contends that posing the question of whether one’s actual life is meaningful “emerges from the deep layer of my heart when I notice that the solid psychological ground which was supporting the affirmative basis of my life has suddenly collapsed or disappeared into nothing” (2015: 55). I take his implicit reasoning to be that the importance of a philosophical perspective, at least when it comes to meaning in life, is a function of its emotional source. If I am led to question whether my life is meaningful because I am experiencing concern, fear, dread, angst or the like with regard to it, then that question is (so the argument goes) more weighty than other questions that spring from weaker emotions or from no emotion at all but from mere intellectual curiosity. One might put it this way: meaning in life should be approached in terms of what it would *mean to* the enquirer.³

Of course, one might reasonably doubt that the importance of a philosophical approach is strictly a function of its emotional source and the intensity thereof. Being a pluralist about philosophical methods, I am open to the idea that *one* reasonable way to choose amongst them is in terms of whether they satisfy certain emotional needs. But I am also open to the idea that additional reasonable ways to choose philosophical methods are based on what would be useful for the purposes of, say, obtaining important knowledge for its own sake, guiding public policy or relating to others in beneficent ways. Morioka must say more to convince someone who does not already share his view that the only or most reasonable way to choose a philosophical approach is on the basis of the enquirer’s emotional perspective.

Suppose, now, for the sake of argument, that the importance of a philosophical approach were solely a function of the degree to which it speaks to

³ Compare this approach with that advocated by Yamaguchi elsewhere in this volume (2015: 66-89) and discussed in 2.4 below.

the intense emotional life of the enquirer. Interestingly, it would not follow that the “the heart of meaning in life” is invariably the most vital method for thinking about life’s meaning. That is because one’s strongest emotions might be about not one’s own life, but rather that of someone else.

Consider someone who is more concerned that his children live meaningful lives than that he does. Think about a father who asks, “Alas, do the lives of my children as they are have any meaning at all?”. This question could well “emerge from the deep layer of his heart when he notices that the solid ground which was supporting the affirmative basis of their lives has suddenly collapsed or disappeared into nothing”. If so, then an external approach to meaning in life would be called for, and not the purely internalist “heart of meaning in life”, by the logic of what appears to be Morioka’s reasoning in defence of the latter.

Similar remarks apply to non-presentist and gradient methods; these, too, could be what would most satisfy a given enquirer’s deepest emotional concerns. Consider: “Alas, will the lives of my children have any meaning at all?”, or “Alas, will the lives of my children have any substantial meaning?”. These questions could also spring from the deepest layer of a father’s heart.

It is true that these questions are not the same as what Morioka calls “the heart of meaning in life”, but the present issue is why we should focus on the latter and not also the former to a comparable degree. The only argument Morioka seems to have provided for deeming “the heart of meaning in life” to be central is about its emotional source, but I have argued that people with strong other-regarding sentiments might not be led to “the heart of meaning in life”.

Finally, notice that, despite their official views that comparing meaning between lives cannot be done, both Morioka and Kukita seem to invite such comparisons at certain points in their articles. Morioka says, “The life of a person of no importance can have equal meaning to the life of a distinguished person” (2015: 53), which implies a comparison between them. And Kukita maintains that certain works of art are great, not that all works of art are great (2015: 211-212), which suggests the view that a life that has created great art is to some degree more important for having done so than a life that has not, all things being equal.

It would normally be offensive to tell someone that her life is not as meaningful as someone else’s, and perhaps this is influencing Morioka and Kukita to reject this kind of appraisal altogether (see Kukita’s mention of

insolence at 2015: 211). However, the fact that a judgment would be offensive to convey does not mean that the judgment would be false. After all, just because it would be offensive to tell someone that he is ugly does not mean that he is not. Our moral reticence to communicate certain judgments to others is one thing, and their truth or falsity is another.

Unlike Morioka and Kukita, Peter Baumann readily accepts that thought about life's meaning sensibly employs an external, non-presentist and gradient approach. His enquiry instead concerns how much precision (and organization) can be expected from such an approach. He reads *Meaning in Life* as suggesting that substantial precision (and organization) is available, and he provides serious reason to doubt that. Baumann is correct that reflection on interpersonal comparisons of meaning simply has not been undertaken in the field, and his article is a first, important step.

Baumann often works with the example of three lives, that of Euclid, Picasso and a second-rate painter, and I shall do the same. How precisely can we assess the degree of meaning in such lives? According to Baumann, not in any absolute way. What is typically available to us are comparative judgments that are true relative to certain variable purposes or standards.

When we compare Euclid's life with Picasso's life and judge that their lives are equally meaningful we use a very rough degree of granularity. We think about them as extraordinarily creative people in general who have made an important contribution. However, when we compare Picasso's life with the other painter's life we do in addition think of them as painters, perhaps even as painters of the same period. Our degree of granularity is much finer here (Baumann 2015: 39).

An important implication of this view is that there is an indeterminacy with regard to the question of how much meaning there is in one life compared to another, even working with just two lives (and so setting aside issues of transitivity). For Baumann, one cannot answer that in the abstract, and must first specify the context, where contexts can vary considerably.

There is then not just one ranking of lives with respect to meaning but several which differ as to the degree of granularity. Consider a rougher ranking and a finer-grained ranking of lives with respect to meaning. Even

if all the lives considered should have a definite position in the rougher ranking (e.g., Picasso, Euclid, the other painter and some others all equally high up...), they might not all have a definite place in the more fine-grained ranking. For instance, while Picasso's life is, according to our example, more meaningful than the other painter's life it is not clear where Euclid's life is located (Baumann 2015: 40).

I think that Baumann is correct that *one way* that we can and routinely do compare lives is relative to certain interests or contexts. One could use a "microscope" and focus on the meaningfulness of two people's paintings, on the one hand, or use a "naked eye" to assess creativity more broadly. The question is whether this is all that is available to us, and in the following I aim to provide some reason to think not.

If there is going to be some more absolute approach to comparing lives, it will likely be a function of the best theory available about what constitutes meaning in life. To see this point, first consider some analogies. If one wants to know whether one rock has more gold in it than another, answering that from some kind of human perspective as such should invoke the chemical analysis of gold as Au with atomic number 79. The more of that chemical, the more gold that is present, at least for any (near) absolute perspective available to human beings.

Similarly, if one wants to know whether one person was more morally wicked than another and to what degree, it would make sense to appeal to the most defensible philosophical account of what it means to live immorally. Presumably such a theory would entail (amongst other things) a ranking of wrong acts,⁴ so that, e.g., killing one's spouse for the insurance money is worse than breaking a promise to meet a student in order to play pinball.

Not only would the theory entail that some acts are more wrong than others, but it would also indicate the rough extent to which one act is more wrong than another. For instance, the degree to which killing for money (A) is worse than breaking a promise for amusement (B) is greater than the degree to which breaking a promise for amusement (B) is worse than forgetting to pay for one's share of office coffee (C). The space between A and B on the imagined scale is larger than the space between B and C.

⁴ The next remarks about degrees of wrongness are cribbed from Metz (2002a: 282).

Although one is hard pressed to say exactly how much space there is between these acts (and there might well in principle not be any precise answer to that question), wrongness plausibly has degrees of at least the two sorts just noted. And, so, assessing the extent to which two people have been morally wicked in their lives would involve appealing to such *rough* cardinal judgments of wrongful behaviour.

Now, what goes for the disvalue of wrongness plausibly goes for the value of meaningfulness. If there were a plausible theory of what constitutes meaning in life, akin to theories of what constitutes gold and immorality, then it could be used to ground comparisons of meaning between lives that are independent of more particular purposes and idiosyncratic standards. And I of course think there is such a theory, namely, the fundamentality theory that I advance in *Meaning in Life* (Metz 2013: 219-239, 249).

The fundamentality theory is not simple, and there is probably no fact of the matter about how *exactly* to weigh its various elements against each other. Even so, if the theory were true, or at least most justified, it would seem able to ground context-independent interpersonal comparisons of meaning in life. In principle, when comparing the meaning in people's lives, the fundamentality theory would direct one to attend to factors that include the following: how many facets of their intelligence that they exercised; how much they did so; how sophisticated the exercise of their intelligence was; how dedicated or effortful they were; how much their intelligence was positively oriented towards a fundamental dimension of human life; how broad the fundamental properties were (viz., those basic to an individual or to a society or to the species); how useful their actions ended up being for these properties; and how much they exhibited narrative values such as improvement, redemption and originality.

Appealing to such elements, one readily detects large gaps between periods of a given life (recall the example of my teenage versus middle aged selves), and also potentially between different lives altogether. Returning to Euclid, Picasso and the second-rate painter, it would *not obviously* be nonsensical or impossible to judge which of the first two had a more meaningful life and by how much. To see whether a precise answer were available would require a thorough survey of all the different elements inherent to the fundamentality theory and their careful application to all the different facets of both lives. That would not be an easy task, but seems to be largely doable in principle.

Of course, it could turn out that the lack of precision about how to balance

various facets of the fundamentality theory means that it would fail to render a precise answer about whose life was more meaningful and to what degree (as well as fail to ground transitivity when it comes to ordering more than two lives). However, it could still ground the conclusion that Euclid and Picasso were “in the same ballpark” so far as amount of meaning goes (cf. Baumann 2015: 36-38), or, to use a metaphor I have used elsewhere about degrees of moral status, were “in the same orbit”, compared to the second-rate painter who is in a different one (Metz 2012: 394-395, 397).⁵

2.4. *Are Any Universal Claims about Life’s Meaning Justified?*

Recall that by a “theory” of meaning in life I mean a basic principle intended to capture what all meaningful conditions of any given human person’s life have in common as distinct from the meaningless ones. Such a principle aims to capture the nature of meaning analogous to the way that H₂O captures the essence of water. One reason to doubt that any such theory is available is that meaning is incomparable, as per the previous sub-section. Another reason for doubt is that, even if the meaning in some people’s lives can be compared, there is little reason to think that one can be justified in making claims about meaning across all people. In their contributions, Sho Yamaguchi and Tartaglia provide reason to think that certain aspects of my methodology undercut my ability to make any justified claims about meaning that apply to everyone, even supposing substantial interpersonal comparison were feasible.

Yamaguchi doubts that I am justified in making any claims about meaning with a universal scope because I usually seek to do so by appealing to intuition (as does Kukita 2015: 213-214). In *Meaning in Life*, I use the term “intuition” to signify a judgment of the degree of meaning in a particular case that is less controversial than the more general principles the judgment is being used to evaluate. The claims that caring for others who are medically vulnerable and making a scientific discovery confer meaning on a life, whereas chewing gum and torturing people for the fun of it fail to do so, are examples of intuitions that I used to evaluate principles, e.g., ones that meaning is merely a function of

⁵ And note that deeming lives to be in the same ballpark with respect to degree of meaning might be enough to continue to think in terms of maximally meaningful lives (albeit not a single maximally meaningful life), a concept that is essential to my account of how to judge whether anyone’s life is meaningful on balance (Metz 2013: 154-158).

satisfying one's strongest desires or consists solely of developing rational natures. Insofar as the principles accord with the intuitions, that is some evidence in the former's favour, and insofar as they fail to do so, that is some evidence against them. Or so I maintain in the book.

However, Yamaguchi maintains that these evidential claims are true only for those who also share my intuitions, which is not everyone. According to him, for any intuition I posit, there will be someone who could have the opposite intuition, meaning that any principle I seek to defend with my intuition will not be justified for such an interlocutor, pulling the rug out from any pretensions I have for the principle's universal validity. As he puts it, "Generally speaking, any argument grounded on some intuitive judgments finally backfires in the sense that its alleged adequacy will be rejected by another argument of the same type" (2015: 76; cf. Tartaglia 2015: 103).

After mounting this argument in a thoughtful and rigorous manner, he maintains that all is not lost for *Meaning in Life*, since its "real worth" (Yamaguchi 2015: 66, 67, 75, 80, 88) lies in its existential, and not theoretical, dimensions. In particular, Yamaguchi suggests that my "intellectual inquiry into life's meaning carries with it an excellence in the sense that it succeeds in encouraging us as his fellows to engage in the same type of inquiry in our ways in turn" (2015: 88).

I of course would like the book to exhibit both kinds of value, and, moreover, to have existential import *because* it is theoretically powerful. As I said in its first few pages, I largely wrote *Meaning in Life* out of the sense that my life would be somewhat more meaningful insofar as I were to make progress towards understanding the nature of meaning (2013: 1-3; see also 13, 249). Although Yamaguchi thinks that the book can have existential significance without having a theoretical one, for me the former depends crucially on the latter.

So, the question becomes whether the appeal to intuition undercuts the project of defending a theory of what constitutes meaning in life that has a universal scope. It had better not, or else an enormous range of philosophical projects are doomed, including theorization about morality, well-being, reference, personal identity, causation and much, much else. As I note in the book, even philosophical theories of justification invariably appeal to intuitions about what is justified and what is not (2013: 8n8). How else is one to evaluate a purportedly maximally general principle except by appeal to what is both more

particular and less controversial than it?

And note that Yamaguchi himself is naturally read as appealing to intuition, not about meaning, but about justification. When he says that someone who has a different intuition about meaning makes my appeal to intuition about meaning unjustified as a way to defend any universally binding claim, he is himself appealing to an *intuition about the nature of justification*. But if intuitions about what is justified or unjustified are philosophically sound, then so are intuitions about what is meaningful or not.

Beyond this dialectical, “partners in guilt” argument against Yamaguchi, I note several reasons to think that Yamaguchi’s intuition about the lack of justification is what is in fact unjustified, not my appeal to intuitions about meaning. First off, it is important to note that it is not relevant merely to point out that someone *says* (Yamaguchi 2015: 75) something counter to an intuition. After all, one could *say* that plants are self-conscious without *thinking* that, where only the latter would be pertinent to ascertaining justified belief.

Furthermore, it is not even relevant merely to note that someone *could judge* (Yamaguchi 2015: 78) something counter to an intuition or that there *might be* such a person (Yamaguchi 2015: 84). A deaf person *could judge* a piece of music not to be beautiful, there *might be* a person on drugs who denies that jumping off a cliff would damage his health, and a layperson *could fail to judge* there to be a proton spiralling off upon a collision of particles in a cloud chamber. However, these *possibilities* would provide no epistemic reason for one who hears to doubt that a piece of music is beautiful, for one who is sober to doubt that health would be risked upon jumping off a cliff, or for a physicist to doubt that there is a proton in the cloud chamber.

At best, the relevant case would be one in which someone *who is competent* to judge issues of meaning in life *actually judges* something contrary to an intuition I posit. Now, is there in fact such a person who *sincerely believes* that taking pleasure in harming other innocent people confers meaning on his life (Yamaguchi 2015: 75-76)? Supposing he understands what talk of “meaning in life” means, it is doubtful; it is more likely that a person would think that his own happiness matters more than meaningfulness than that he would think that meaningfulness is constituted by taking pleasure in harming innocents.

Suppose, however, that Yamaguchi were to succeed in finding someone who truly believes that meaning in his life would be enhanced by taking pleasure in causing others pain. What then?

Here, the deep point in reply would be that I am not seeking to evaluate theories merely on the basis of any intuitions taken as ultimate or fixed. If someone thinks that taking pleasure in harming others is meaningful, then I would seek out some *other*, ideally *stronger* intuitions that he has, and make the case that they support a certain, more general principle (or cluster of them) that gives him reason to *revise* his intuition about harming others.⁶

In short, my epistemic aim is not to find a theory that entails and plausibly explains all extant intuitions of a given interlocutor, but is rather to find one (or a group) that best accounts for intuitions held after the process of reflecting theoretically on them. And since this process, which will take many decades, has begun in earnest only fairly recently amongst philosophers with regard to meaning in life, I remain optimistic about the prospect of convergence.

Finally, note that by “convergence” I do not mean unanimous agreement about a narrowly defined theory. Instead, I mean something like what is sometimes encountered in science, where a very large majority of experts agree that certain theoretical options are plausible or not and such substantial agreement (but not full-blown consensus) is strong evidence for views with a universal scope. Beliefs in phlogiston, a flat earth and the plum pudding model of the atom are false for anyone regardless of when and where she has lived, whereas beliefs in some kind of process of natural selection and some version of quantum mechanics are true for all societies. These judgments of which beliefs are universally true and false are justified by virtue of what most contemporary scientists have come to hold. And I seek out something similar when it comes to beliefs about what is and is not meaningful; here, too, what most systematic enquirers have come to hold about this subject matter could provide strong evidence for claims with a universal scope, e.g., that taking pleasure in causing pain to another innocent person cannot confer meaning on one’s life.

Tartaglia’s major reason for being sceptical about the prospect of being able to justify any universal claims about meaning differs from Yamaguchi’s. According to him, the theory of linguistic reference that I occasionally invoke in the book undercuts the ability to ground any claims about meaning with a universal scope.

This theory is the sort of causal account of reference that Saul Kripke and

⁶ Note that this is how I would also deal with those who are inclined to judge Hitler to have lead a meaningful life, which judgment Tartaglia takes to be evidence of the utter indeterminacy of the analytic approach (2015: 103-104).

Hilary Putnam developed in the context of proper names and mass nouns. Very roughly, on their view, a certain term refers to a particular object or property in the world if someone once dubbed it with the term and others now intend to use the term to pick out the thing initially dubbed. The view naturally underwrites an objective or realist approach to science, as the *nature* of the thing dubbed is mind-independent and something to be discovered over time through empirical means.

A number of philosophers, particularly associated with Cornell, have employed this theory of reference to develop an objective account of morality. For them, a term such as “wrongness” refers to certain kinds of behaviour, where the nature of that behaviour is likewise mind-independent and something to be apprehended through *a posteriori* enquiry. At times in the book, I invoked this kind of approach to make sense of how it might be possible for both morality and meaning to be objective.

Suggesting how morality and meaning plausibly could be objective differs from providing substantial evidence that they are objective in the way I suggest. Tartaglia remarks that I offer “very little in way of justification” (2015: 106; see also Kukita 2015: 213) for the realist views proposed, but that was intentional on my part; as I said in the book, I wanted to avoid complicated metaphysical and meta-ethical debates, so as to focus squarely on meaning (Metz 2013: 7, 22n5, 170, 172; see also 111, 120, 134, 243). I did not mean to suggest that I had provided conclusive reason to accept realist accounts of morality and meaning. Instead, my specific limited aims were, first, to demonstrate how a naturalist might on the face of it be able to account for an invariant morality, i.e., to show that it is not obvious that only God could ground one (2013: 91-96), and, second, to give pause to those who adhere to subjectivism because they cannot see how any sort of objective value would be possible apart from God (2013: 170-172).

Tartaglia maintains that the sort of objectivity that could be grounded by a causal theory of reference is not one that would suit my purposes, which include identifying some claims about meaning that are true for all human persons. If different societies used terms such as “meaningful” to refer to different patterns of behaviour, then, by the causal theory, there would be mind-independent facts about the nature of these patterns, but the patterns would not be uniform across all societies. There would be objectivity but without universality.

Elsewhere, in a debate with Allen Wood, I have myself argued that value realists who seek out claims with a universal scope must address the sort of

possibility that Tartaglia raises (Metz 2007: 369-372). I also spoke of the issue in *Meaning in Life*, in the context of a universal morality (2013: 95). There, I noted that naturalistic moral realists could plausibly draw on sociobiological accounts of the origin moral norms to explain why all human societies would use their respective terms for morality to refer to the same cluster of behavioural properties. The naturalistic realist about meaning who invokes a causal theory of reference owes a similar kind of explanation.

Alas, I lack a convincing one at present; however, one might readily emerge from my theoretical account of the nature of meaning. If I am correct that great meaning, i.e., that which warrants substantial pride and admiration, comes from positive engagement with the fundamental conditions of human life, i.e., conditions responsible for much else about major dimensions of human existence, such as reasoning and relating, then it is reasonable to suspect that meaning-talk in all human societies would refer to such properties; for if it referred to something other than these properties, humans would have been much less likely to maintain themselves over time. I suggested this sort of strategy in the final chapter of the book: “What would have facilitated survival and flourishing are judging behaviour to be worthy of great esteem insofar as it exhibited, roughly, respect for reasoning and sharing and judging behaviour to be worthy of great shame to the extent that it has been degrading of the fundamental conditions of human life” (Metz 2013: 244).

3. Giving Supernaturalism Its Due

Although I am a naturalist about what makes life meaningful, I take supernaturalism, the view that a spiritual dimension is necessary for life to be meaningful, seriously, and aimed in the book to give it a fair shake. The entire second (and longest) part of *Meaning in Life* is devoted to critically exploring God-based and soul-based accounts of what constitutes meaning in life. In 3.1 below, I consider the view that in the book I missed an important rationale for thinking that life would be meaningless without immortality, perhaps of an ensouled kind. In 3.2, I address objections to my argument against the view that God’s *purpose* could constitute meaning since that view fails to cohere with the best rationale for thinking that God alone could do so. Finally, in 3.3 I respond to criticisms of my argument against any supernaturalism about meaning, according to which adherents to it typically exhibit incoherent beliefs in doing

so.

3.1. How Might Death Undercut Meaning in Life?

In *Meaning in Life*, I sought to unify all the major arguments for thinking that immortality is necessary for meaning in life, at least insofar as they are fairly promising. Specifically, I contended that they ultimately rely on what I called the “perfection thesis”, the claim that engagement with a maximally conceivable (or possible) value is necessary for a life to be meaningful. For example, the suggestion that life would be meaningless insofar as the wicked were to flourish and the upright were to suffer rests upon the claim that ideal justice is necessary for meaning. Similarly, the idea that one’s life would be meaningless if one were not to enjoy God forever in Heaven supposes that a perfect being is essential.

Fumitake Yoshizawa contends that there is another *prima facie* strong argument for an immortality requirement for life’s meaning that I did not address and that does not appear to depend on the perfection thesis. He maintains that one might be motivated to hold the immortality requirement, not because one seeks a perfect value in an eternal afterlife, but rather because one wants an imperfect value not to end. And he thinks this is in fact the best way to understand Tolstoy, who “finds that all valuable things for him will be ‘lost’ because they will die or disappear. And because of this fact, he feels sorrow and loses his zest for life. Then, he claims that his life is meaningless” (Yoshizawa 2015: 144).

I find insightful Yoshizawa’s suggestions, first, that there is a difference between thinking that life would be meaningless in the absence of a perfect value and thinking that it would be so if an imperfect value were to become absent, and, second, that the latter view is worth taking seriously. Although he ultimately rejects the latter rationale for an immortality requirement as unsound, Yoshizawa’s central point is that I cannot claim to have provided a thorough rejection of it merely by having argued against the perfection thesis.

There are occasions when Yoshizawa phrases his argument in a way that begs the question against the friend of the immortality requirement. Consider this remark: “Metz interprets immortality as a condition for *obtaining meaning*, but in view of the idea that I present, immortality means the *negation of the death* of a person whose life *already has meaning*” (2015: 134). To say that what

is problematic about death is that it ends a *meaningful* life implies that meaning is possible without immortality, which is exactly what the friend of the immortality requirement denies.

So, to express the point in a way that would be useful to the adherent to the immortality requirement, I suspect one ought to say something like this: life is meaningless if and because certain, imperfect activities, relationships or states come to an end. Or as Yoshizawa aptly says elsewhere, “immortality can mean simply retaining the existence of things with their usual earthly value” (2015: 139).

I wonder, though, whether things would in fact retain their “usual earthly value” if they never came to an end. A love that lasts forever and an object that merits intellectual contemplation for an eternity seem naturally described as “perfect” or “ideal”. Yoshizawa is aiming to present “at least one understanding of immortality in which the amount of value is not important” (2015: 139), but one might reasonably doubt that he has succeeded.

In reply, Yoshizawa could try to argue that, even if a value that lasted forever would indeed be perfect, it would not be the *perfection* that would best explain why death would plausibly make meaning impossible. There is logical space for Yoshizawa to make such a move. But is it attractive space? I am afraid that I find it difficult to suggest what else might do the explanatory work. To think that one’s loving relationships will end, and indeed that one’s beloveds will die, and that these facts entail that love fails to confer meaning on one’s life seems best explained by the idea that the love is imperfect.

3.2. Could God’s Purpose Be the Source of Life’s Meaning?

I appreciate the power of the claim that life’s meaning is captured by fulfilling a purpose that God, as understood in the monotheist tradition, has assigned us.⁷ Where does the higher value of meaning in life come from, a value that transcends our physical capacity for pleasure? From a holy being who is in a spiritual realm. Why is God necessary for meaning in life? Because without God having commanded to us to do some things rather than others, there would be no invariant moral rules, or other kinds of objective value, by which to abide. What explains the different degrees of meaning in people’s lives? Some

⁷ The rest of this paragraph is pinched from Metz (2016b).

have lived up to God's commands better than others. What accounts for the significance of Nelson Mandela's and Mother Teresa's lives in comparison to the relative insignificance of a serial killer's? The former have done much more to fulfil God's commands than has the latter.

However, in *Meaning in Life* I ultimately argue against this particular God-based theory of meaning in life. In a nutshell, my reasoning is that for God to be necessary for any significance in our lives, He must have certain qualities that cannot exist in the natural world, these qualities must be qualitatively superior to any goods possible in a physical universe, and they must be what ground meaning in it. I take a cue from one major strand of perfect being theology and propose that, if a God-based theory were true, it would have to be so because meaning depends on the existence of a perfect being, where perfection requires properties such as atemporal, simple and immutable personhood, which is possible only in a spiritual realm. And then I also take a cue from oft-expressed concerns about conflict between God's otherness and God's personality, and note that a perfect being, so conceived, appears to be incapable of being purposive. If meaning must come from God, it probably will not by virtue of fulfilling a purpose He has assigned us (but rather, I suggest, from a mutually loving relationship between us and God).

Jason Poettcker carefully and accurately recounts this dialectic, and provides reason to doubt the two most crucial steps in it. In particular, he maintains that the best explanation of why God might be necessary for meaning does not imply that God is simple, atemporal or immutable, in the ways I conceive these properties, and that, even if it did, God could still be purposive.

Regarding the latter issue, Poettcker remarks, "There is also a large body of literature on God's relation to time that Metz utterly fails to engage.... To be fair, Metz does acknowledge that these responses are out there, but he does not engage with them" (2015: 190, 192). I did not in the book aim to provide conclusive reason that God's simplicity and atemporality (for instance) would be logically incompatible with purposiveness. I am not a metaphysician, and wanted to avoid intricate debates in metaphysics as much as I could, so as to focus on meaning (2013: 111, 120, 134, 243). So, I drew upon traditional concerns in the literature about how a radically other God could interact us in ways that adherents to a purpose theory normally conceive, presenting a challenge to the latter to show either that purposiveness can cohere with simplicity and atemporality, or that God need not have such properties in order

to ground meaning. I aimed to provide a new problem for purpose theory, “the most significant” one (2013: 113) that would provide reason to consider alternative God-based theories (2013: 118), and did not assert, or mean to suggest, that it could not be resolved in the end.

That said, my concerns are not allayed by the sketches Poettcker has provided about how a simple and atemporal God might be able to assign us a purpose. Quoting Augustine who claims that God is the source of time, Poettcker says, “If God created time then it would not make sense to say that God’s decision to create took time. Metz assumes that time would have to exist before God created and that creation implies temporality, but these assumptions are not adequately supported” (2015: 191). But the “assumptions” are ones of definitional analysis. Creating by definition appears to be an event, and an event is essentially, if not also by definition, something that takes time. And so I believe the burden is on the purpose theorist to explain how an atemporal being could do something that takes time, indeed, how one could *create* time in the first place (and not merely *our* time, as per Eleonore Stump and Norman Kretzmann, whom Poettcker cites).

Poettcker is correct that I have not shown that attempts from the likes of, say, William Lane Craig fail, but the main point of my argument was that such attempts need to be thoroughly considered by others who wish to defend the purpose theory. I above all wanted to make the case that such a metaphysical problem has an important bearing on issues of meaning, requires a solution that appears difficult to devise, and makes it reasonable to explore non-purposive alternatives by those inclined to think that God grounds meaning in life.

Turning to the other major step, Poettcker also maintains that the purpose theorist ultimately need not show that purposiveness and simplicity/atemporality are compatible, since God could ground meaning without exhibiting the latter properties. Here, again, I did not mean to suggest that I had provided conclusive reason to maintain that only a simple/atemporal God could ground meaning; my claim was that such a rationale for deeming God to be necessary for meaning is, for all I can tell, “more auspicious” and “more promising” than other rationales (2013: 110, 112, 120).

And I continue to think that in light of Poettcker’s alternative suggestions in his article. He mentions two that appear to be logically distinct (but that could be conjoined). On the one hand, he maintains that God would be a person who *necessarily* has the properties of being powerful, knowledgeable and good

(presumably to a maximal degree), whereas anything in nature would have these merely accidentally. “Even if we could find instances of goodness, knowledge and power in nature, this would not mean that nature is sufficient for meaning if meaning in life requires having these qualities *essentially*” (Poettcker 2015: 190).

This is an indeed a position that I did not consider in the book, and I value Poettcker’s having advanced it. The key issue is whether essentially exhibiting the three classic values is enough to explain why only God could ground meaning, even granting, for now, that only God could essentially exhibit them. Imagine, now, a physical person who accidentally exhibited goodness, knowledge and power, but did so to a superlative degree. By the logic of Poettcker’s suggestion, *no* meaning could come from orienting one’s life towards such a being. I find more plausible the idea that some meaning could come from doing so, even if *more* would come from orienting one’s life around God.

Poettcker’s other basic suggestion about why God alone could make our lives meaningful is more familiar, and, from my perspective, less promising. It is that objective value, one that applies to all human beings independent of their mental states, could come only from God. As he puts it,

The good, true, and beautiful do not have the kind of final value that Metz argues they do, if they are grounded in nature. Value requires a value giver and nature cannot give objective value.... (H)umans cannot maintain or sustain the objective value of anything because they are contingent, finite, mutable beings.... God is the only being that can give things objective value.... (I)f God did not exist, and did not give one a purpose, anything else that one directed one’s life toward would not be have final or objective value and thus one’s life would be meaningless (2015: 200, 201).

I addressed this meta-ethical theory not in the chapter addressing arguments against purpose theory, on which Poettcker focuses (2013: 98-118), but rather in the chapter that critically discusses arguments for it (2013: 77-97).

In particular, I addressed John Cottingham’s argumentation for thinking that only God could ground objective value and hence meaning. I argued that he, along with most of those who advance such a view, evince an incoherence in

their beliefs, since they claim to know that there is objective value but do not claim to know that God exists, even if they have *faith* that He does (and I also sketched a way that nature plausibly could ground objective value). Since Poettcker does not take up that rationale, I leave the debate with him here, but move on to Nicholas Waghorn, who has thoroughly taken it up.

3.3. *Can Supernaturalists Avoid Incoherent Beliefs?*

In *Meaning in Life* I sought to provide a new argument that would provide a large majority of who (are inclined to) hold supernaturalism reason not to do so. According to the core of this argument, there is a logical inconsistency in holding the following three views: (1) I know “If X, then Y” is true; (2) I know X obtains; (3) I do not know whether Y obtains. Call these “the three claims”.

Now, I maintain that most supernaturalists would be committed to an instantiation of the three claims. Specifically, for a majority of those who claim to know that supernaturalism is true, it would be the case that they would then hold the following version of the three claims: (1*) I know “If meaning exists, then God exists” is true; (2*) I know meaning exists; (3*) I do not know whether God exists. And I suggest that they ought to drop (1*), the God-based theory of life’s meaning, since (2*) and (3*) are much more defensible.

(1*) is the claim that one has enough epistemic reason for knowledge (which I called “conclusive reason” in the book) of a God-based theory of meaning in life. (2*) is the default position of most philosophers, including supernaturalists, working in the field of meaning in life; a large majority reject nihilism when it comes to meaning in individual lives and for what they think is conclusive reason (even if many deny that the human race as a whole has a meaning in relation to something beyond it). And (3*) is the idea that, even if one has faith in God, or *some* epistemic reason to believe in Him, it is extremely difficult to maintain that one has enough (“conclusive”) epistemic reason for knowledge⁸ of His existence; many religious believers, even philosophical ones, deny that they know God exists.

In the book, I argued that Cottingham, the field’s current most prominent and careful God-based theorist, expresses commitment to all three of these claims,

⁸ By “conclusive” evidence I did not mean infallible warrant, as Waghorn suspects (2015: 153-157); I meant merely that the evidence is weighty enough for knowledge, which is the way I took Cottingham to use the term.

and I suggested that most other God-based theorists are implicitly committed to them. I also generalized the argument to soul-based theories; here, too, few do (or reasonably can) claim knowledge that a soul exists, but they do claim to know that meaning exists, making it incoherent to claim to know that if meaning exists, then a soul exists.

Unfortunately, those whom I know have spent the most time considering this incoherence objection to supernaturalism, including Waghorn,⁹ have misinterpreted it, in two major ways. There are similarities between the objection and other, prominent forms of philosophical thought, and in *Meaning in Life* I did not take the time to forestall conflation between them. In the following, I work above all to clarify the nature of my objection, and to urge others to confuse it with neither the view that supernaturalists (or naturalists) are intending to advance an inference with the three claims, nor the view that epistemic closure is essentially at stake with my analysis of them.

First, Waghorn and others have thought that I understand various participants in the debate about the nature of meaning to be advancing an inference via the three claims. For example, Waghorn says, “I take the thrust of Metz’ argument to be that the evidence for wrongness and for Cottingham’s conditional *transmits* warrant, and hence (I am assuming here) justification, to the proposition that God exists” (2015: 152; see also 156, 158-159, 162).

But that is not, as I understand it, the thrust of my argument. I do not read Cottingham as offering an inference for the conclusion that God exists. The point of my argument is that Cottingham *denies* he can provide any inference that would underwrite knowledge of God’s existence (and that many other supernaturalists would follow suit)! And, further, that this denial is incoherent upon claiming to know that meaning exists and that the existence of meaning implies God’s existence (and, finally, that one should therefore give up claiming to know the latter). My contention is that Cottingham and others accept the three claims, which are logically inconsistent, not that he invokes the three claims as a collection to draw a conclusion.

Relatedly, Waghorn misinterprets my claim that a naturalist approach to meaning avoids incoherence. Speaking of me, Waghorn says, “I take him here to mean that his position satisfies (A*), as he knows that morality exists, he knows that morality is a function of natural properties, and so he knows what this

⁹ As well as Jessica Lerm in correspondence and Tom Angier in a talk given at a launch of *Meaning in Life*.

entails: that there are natural properties” (2015: 156). But this is not what I mean. I am not seeking to infer that there are natural properties. Instead, I am contending that a naturalist instantiation of the three claims is not logically inconsistent. One might well not know that a naturalist theory of meaning is true, but if one were to assert knowledge of it, one would not contradict other claims one would be inclined to make, viz., that meaning exists and natural properties exist.

Second, I do not take myself to be invoking any principle of epistemic closure, let alone of epistemic transmission (as per Waghorn 2015: 152). These principles assert that one knows something, upon (or in virtue of) knowing something else. Along these lines, Waghorn ascribes the following principle to me, and bases the rest of his critical discussion on it: “If I know that X obtains, and I know that ‘If X, then Y’ is true, then I know that Y” (2015: 151).

However, I never spoke of such a principle, with Waghorn acknowledging that he has “reconstructed” it in light of my comments (2015: 151n1), and I did not intend anything like what the principle says. My point is not that supernaturalists are committed to knowing something, upon knowing something else, whereas in fact, according to me, they do not know. It is rather that supernaturalists *themselves often enough claim not to know that God exists* (patent in Cottingham’s case), which is inconsistent when conjoined with the claims to know both that supernaturalism is true and that some lives are meaningful, which supernaturalists also often enough hold. To avoid the inconsistency, I maintain, they ought to drop adherence to supernaturalism, while retaining their scepticism about God’s existence and their confidence in the existence of meaning in life.

Perhaps principles of closure and transmission lurk implicitly in the incoherence objection, as articulated above, which would license the intricate and deep explorations of them in Waghorn’s article. At this stage, however, I do not see that I am committed to them.

Some of Waghorn’s discussion is still relevant, despite my intentions not having been clear. In one place, for example, Waghorn suggests that Cottingham could avoid incoherence by denying to know that if meaning exists, then God exists: “(H)e does not think he *knows* the conditional, he merely takes a weaker attitude toward it, like holding it to be true, or having a certain degree of justified belief in it (this is suggested by Cottingham’s claim that he ‘maintains’ the conditional, rather than ‘knows’ it)” (2015: 153).

Waghorn acknowledges the implication of this move: “Cottingham must accept that his arguments for a supernaturalist theory of life’s meaning do not conclusively refute alternate views” (2015: 153). Waghorn thinks that Cottingham might be satisfied with such a position, but I do not think he, or supernaturalists generally, should be. As the field stands, it is hard to believe that a new argument would come on the scene to provide evidence of God’s existence sufficient for knowledge. Similarly, it is hard to believe that those working in the field of meaning in life would encounter a consideration that would lead them to deny that the Einsteins and Mandelas of the world have had such a value in their lives. That means that, if there is indeed an incoherence, supernaturalism has virtually no prospect of being known. It is not merely that we lack conclusive evidence for it now; it is that, for all we can tell, the prospect of encountering that kind of evidence is slim.

At another place, Waghorn considers the possibility of avoiding the incoherence in the way that Roger Crisp once suggested in correspondence with me (cf. 2013: 97n17), namely, by *now* claiming to know that God exists, precisely in light of knowing that a God-based account of meaning is true and that meaning exists. In reply to Crisp, I said that such a move is unpromising, since it is the God-based account of meaning that is in question. It is a highly contested theory in need of argumentation, not a stable premise to be used to draw a conclusion about the existence of God. And to this reply, Waghorn has two interesting responses.

First, Waghorn remarks that “surely whether we are unsure of the conditional claim is not a problem for *Cottingham*, as, on Metz’ interpretation, the former does take himself to know this” (2015: 160). But it remains a problem for Cottingham in particular since he also takes himself not to know that God exists. According to his concluding summary of arguments for and against theism, Cottingham says, “the evidence from the observable world was at best compatible with a claim about its ultimate divine source: although not ruling it out, it was not such as to support it either” (2003: 92; see also Cottingham 2005: 6-8, 13, 24-25, 47-48, 57-58, 61-62, 118-119, 122-124, 133). His commitment to the Pascalian tradition is strong; belief in God for epistemic reason is not, nor is ever likely to be, prescribed, but pragmatic considerations recommend such belief. It is unlikely that Cottingham would all of a sudden proclaim knowledge of God in light of the argument Waghorn and Crisp suggest on his behalf.

But should he? Waghorn's second response is that "Cottingham has given us arguments to *establish* that we know this conditional, and so it may be unjustified to be unsure of the claim, depending on how successful those arguments are" (2015: 160). Waghorn is correct that Cottingham has aimed to (or is plausibly reading as having aimed to) provide conclusive evidence of a God-based theory of meaning, one that implies that if meaning exists, then God exists. And so it is apt for Waghorn to point out that, if choosing with thoroughness which of the three claims to let go of, one ought to examine all the evidence for and against each of them.

As things stand amongst most contemporary philosophers working in the analytic tradition, objective value need not have its source in God, as per Cottingham's central argument for a God-based theory of meaning, and God's existence looks doubtful in light of the problem of evil and inability to figure into the best explanation of comparatively uncontested data. However, there of course remains debate about these matters, which involves metaphysics, meta-ethics, epistemology and the philosophy of language, all of which were well beyond the scope of *Meaning in Life*, and probably remain beyond the scope of my lifetime. Waghorn is of course correct that such investigations "cannot be postponed indefinitely" (2015: 159n18) if the debate about naturalism and supernaturalism is to be taken further, but that is a project for the field more broadly, not for me. I would be content to have shown that Cottingham and other supernaturalists must choose between the three claims of knowing that if meaning exists, God exists, knowing that meaning exists, and not knowing that God exists, and to have noted that, on balance at the moment, philosophical opinion counsels letting go of the first claim.

4. Capturing Naturalism

Here I address the contributors insofar as they have provided some reason to doubt my favoured naturalist theory of what can make a life meaningful. According to it, one's life can be meaningful in a purely physical universe if (roughly) one contours one's intelligence (of which one kind is emotional) towards conditions fundamental to human life. For conditions to be fundamental is for them to account for much else of a certain human domain, e.g., for much of the course of a particular person's life or of the way that the human species has developed. In the first two subsections, I take up objections that basically

apply to my conception of contouring intelligence. Specifically, in 4.1 I tackle the claim, inspired by a reading of Buddhism, that the highest meaning would not involve a deliberate striving towards a certain, meaningful state of affairs, which contrasts with the usual way that I characterize contouring, and in 4.2 I respond to the argument that I have not provided enough justification to believe that contouring is best understood as non-consequentialist. In 4.3, I reply to objections that fundamentality is not the relevant object towards which to contour one's intelligence (supposing one should).

4.1. Is Great Meaning Compatible with Striving?

So far as I have been able to tell, use of terms such as “meaningful”, “significant” and the like are fairly peculiar to Western societies. High praise for a life in other cultures such as the African and the East Asian tends rather to invoke terms such as “wise”, “excellent” or “virtuous”. Despite the differences in terminology, there is plausibly overlap conceptually. What both kinds of talk probably connote are ways of living that merit substantial esteem or admiration or that achieve purposes much higher than those relating to one's animal self. This conceptual common ground makes it apt to engage in cross-cultural comparison and evaluation.

Christopher Ketcham discusses one major strain of Buddhism in light of the views salient in *Meaning in Life*, especially comparing and contrasting it with my favoured theory of life's meaning in terms of contouring one's intelligence towards fundamental conditions of human life. According to Ketcham, there is a type of meaning that early Buddhism rates most highly but that the fundamentality theory fails to capture, a fascinating point that he makes with care. Yu Urata makes a similar point more briefly by invoking the importance of what he calls “trans-meaning” in the context of Zen Buddhism.

Taking up Ketcham first, he describes two different ways of living, a pre-enlightenment state and a state of enlightenment. A pre-enlightenment state is essentially one in which a person is aware of herself and, especially, what she lacks. It is a state in which one is “clinging, grasping, craving ultimately for more life” (Ketcham 2015: 118), but also for, say, more meaning in life. Consequent to such attachment for something one does not have is suffering or dissatisfaction.

Applying meaning-talk to Buddhism, Ketcham maintains that some meaning

is available to those in a pre-enlightenment state, and he is inclined to identify much of it with what the fundamentality theory picks out. Specifically, he maintains that the “Eightfold Path” towards enlightenment is fairly well captured by contouring one’s intelligence towards what is basic to human life. Ketcham remarks, “Fundamentality theory emphasizes cognitive reorientation (mindfulness), logical decision making (wisdom), and positive orientation to the fundamentals of human existence (ethical thoughts; ethical acts). In this both theories appear to agree” (2015: 121).

Although not all pre-enlightenment lives are equal from the standpoint of meaning, for Ketcham’s interpretation of Buddhism, none of them can achieve the ultimate kind of meaning, which is available only to one who has become enlightened. An enlightened person is one who no longer has the “desire to possess, and to cling to being and further becoming” (Ketcham 2015: 113). A person in such a state does not seek out meaning for herself, and is not one who has collected a great amount of meaning in a pre-enlightenment state. Instead, she exhibits “the most wondrous idea of meaning of all” (Ketcham 2015: 132) in virtue of having transcended concern for her self and instead being focused on others. The enlightened one is “no longer concerned with his or her own meaning derived from the ethical state of *nibbāna*, only in acting in ways that produce meaning for others” (Ketcham 2015: 132). And so follows the title of Ketcham’s article, “Meaning without Ego”.

Ketcham usually interprets such as a state naturalistically, i.e., as an other-regarding orientation that is neither “extra-physical” (2015: 123) nor “transcendental” (2015: 118-119), but instead is “purely and solely an ethical state” (2015: 118n22). The enlightened person “still lives in this world, but this is a person who has shorn the shackles of the need for being and becoming and has ended for himself/herself the unsatisfactory desire for rebirth” (2015: 123).

Turning, now, to Urata, he surveys a wide array of literature in the field of psychology, both Western and Japanese, and compares it with key distinctions drawn in *Meaning in Life*. Many of the distinctions found in the psychological literature, as Urata conveys it, line up nicely with philosophical ones discussed in my book, as he points out. He also presents many of these distinctions pictorially, in an insightful, revealing way that highlights their relationships and prompts reflection (2015: 221).¹⁰

¹⁰ For example, I wonder where a loner who tends his own garden, or a person who writes poems that she does not share with others, would fit in his schema.

Urata rightly notes that I do not use images to convey any ideas, making that one point of difference between our work. In addition, as a psychologist he says that he works with people's reports of their experiences and perspectives, largely "accepting" them and then working with them to obtain greater meaning, a practical standpoint that also differs from my approach. These two differences do not indicate any deep incompatibilities, unlike a potential third difference Urata notes, which concerns what he calls "trans-meaning", short for meaning that has a transcendental dimension (2015: 222). Quoting another scholar, Urata says that it goes beyond plain meaning and consists of "the way of living where he or she transcends the dual view of meaning or no meaning, and does not quest for 'why'" (2015: 220), and in a note he indicates that it is an orientation prominent in Western mysticism and Zen Buddhism (2015: 220n4; see also 223).

Urata's description of someone who no longer asks "Why?" because she has gone beyond the categories of meaning is similar to Ketcham's description of an enlightened person. Both scholars ascribe to Buddhism the view that an ultimately meaningful state of awareness is one that no longer thinks in terms of meaningfulness or the lack of it.

In the following, I do not question this interpretation of Buddhism,¹¹ instead considering whether it is truly something at odds with the fundamentality theory. Note that it is not essential to the fundamentality theory, or indeed most naturalist accounts of meaning in the Anglo-American tradition, that an agent seek out meaning *qua* meaning. The thought is not that, in order to live a meaningful life, one must think in terms of what would make it fall under the description "meaningful". Instead, one simply ought to act in certain ways that are constitutive of meaning, regardless of whether one employs the concept.

Ketcham and Urata have a deeper point to make, here, however, which is that even if the fundamentality theory does not require a focus on the lack of meaning in one's life, it does permit it, which is incompatible with a state of enlightenment. Ketcham says that "the difference between Metz's fundamentality theory and early Buddhist thinking is that in this ethical state of otherwise than being, 'meaning in life' is no longer an issue, and its

¹¹ Though I detect some tensions in Ketcham's reading of the tradition. For instance, sometimes he says that an enlightened person is not merely one who no longer craves to be reborn, but one who has escaped an actual cycle of rebirth that was influenced by *karma* (2015: 125; see also 115). This suggests that an enlightened person has a spiritual nature that had been reincarnated but no longer will be, which is hard to reconcile with Ketcham's repudiation of the "extra-physical".

measurement, and accumulation, is no longer an issue” (2015: 131).

Perhaps, though, one could understand the fundamentality theory to imply that, in order to obtain superlative meaning, a person must be utterly absorbed by the relevant object, as opposed to be aware of herself and the meaning she would accrue upon engaging with it in the right way. Such would plausibly count as an intense kind of “contouring” or “positive orientation” of one’s intelligence towards fundamentality, e.g., another person’s character in the case of love. Western people often deem the most meaningful times in their lives to be ones in which they are unaware of themselves or are “experiencing flow”, and so there seems to be interesting convergence here with a Buddhist approach.

However, there is a key respect in which the fundamentality theory and Buddhism, or at least some facets of Ketcham’s reading of it, do seem incompatible. Even if a person need not, and should not, strive for more meaning *qua* meaning in her life in order to exhibit the superlative sort, she would by the fundamentality theory still often need to *strive for something*. Consider those who *struggle* against injustice, for example. Here, there is plausibly still a kind of desire or craving for a state in which, roughly, people’s reasoning and relating is not oppressed, exploited or neglected.

I am not sure what Ketcham would say about this point. Sometimes it appears that, for him or for Buddhism, enlightenment means not striving for something *for oneself*, but other times it seems that enlightenment means *not striving*, period. Evidence of the latter in Ketcham’s article is the point that striving of any kind brings with it dissatisfaction and suffering, where it appears that the latter conditions are what the enlightened person ultimately overcomes (2015: 114-117). It is hard for me to see how this approach can be reconciled with Ketcham’s description of the enlightened person as one who acts only “in ways that produce meaning for others”; for surely such action would involve striving and hence frustration, disappointment and loss.

The difficulty I am raising is one that I have had for a long time in trying to understand Buddhism. On the one hand, Buddhism is often understood to recommend that one become the sort of person who is not attached to anything in this impermanent, changing and uncontrollable world, so as to avoid negative feelings and emotions. On the other hand, Buddhism is often understood to recommend that one love, or otherwise act for the sake of, others, which appears to mean being precisely so attached and hence vulnerable to such negative states. It is a tension I see not merely in Ketcham’s article, but in the tradition more

generally.

I could well be misunderstanding the religion, and I would welcome clarity about it from those better informed than I. However, insofar as the tension is real in it, I favour some attachment that is other-directed and even some negative emotional states, say, ones in which one hates injustice or is upset at the loss of a loved one (Metz 2013: 142, 183, 220, 233-234; cf. Metz 2014c: 227-228, 230). Otherwise, the religion appears to me to be overly concerned with a person's own happiness, at the expense of her meaning in life.

4.2. Is Meaning Consequentialist?

Some carefully developed theories of life's meaning in the Anglo-American tradition are naturally described as "consequentialist", as their structure mirrors what that tradition labels "consequentialism" when it comes to theories of morally right action. Just as utilitarians about morality often contend that right acts are those that maximize the long-term net balance of well-being over woe in the world, so utilitarians about meaning, such as Peter Singer, have held the same (or something similar, to the effect that maximal meaning would come from such behaviour). And just as perfectionists about morality often contend that right acts are those that maximally promote the amount of excellence in the universe in the long run (perhaps constrained by rights), so perfectionists about meaning, such as Quentin Smith, have held the same. In my book, I objected to these kinds of consequentialism about meaning and those with similar, teleological accounts of how to engage with final value.

Mark Wells points out that the kinds of consequentialism that I targeted are not representative of all possible forms. In fact, he contends that there are some versions of consequentialism that can avoid the counterexamples I made to the standard forms of utilitarianism and perfectionism, so that I have not provided enough reason to doubt consequentialism as such.

Contra my claim that the kind of action one performs can be constitutive of meaning apart from the results it produces, Wells maintains that a consequentialist could deem the action to be a final value to be promoted. Against my contention that where final value is produced can be constitutive of meaning, Wells argues that a consequentialist can assign weight to the distribution of final value. And in contrast to my claim that one's attitude towards final value can be constitutive of meaning, Wells contends that such it is

open to a consequentialist to maintain that such an attitude can itself be a second-order sort of final value. Wells is correct that these kinds of moves have been made in the moral sphere, and so it is reasonable for him to maintain that they are similarly available when it comes to life's meaning.

However, Wells makes the further, bold claim that for any putatively non-consequentialist point about meaning that I might posit, the consequentialist can find a way to interpret it in consequentialist terms (2015: 176-178). He says, "While particular consequentialist theories remain susceptible to such counter-examples, there will always be some consequentialist theory that avoids the counter-example and thereby remains extensionally adequate" (2015: 177). I do not know whether that is true, but let us suppose that such a "gimmicky" approach is indeed available, to use Nozick's fine term (1974: 29; cf. Nozick 1981: 684n21).

Then, I submit that the non-consequentialist would have in fact won the debate! To see why the debate would be over at precisely that point, consider the moral realm first. There, the issue is what a sheriff should do if, by framing and killing one innocent person, he could thereby prevent the killings of several more innocent people, or about whether a doctor should kill one innocent patient if necessary to harvest his organs and thereby save the lives of four other innocents who would die without them. Standard forms of moral consequentialism appear to entail that it would be right to kill one in these cases.

In reply, some moral consequentialists argue that the consequences are under-described, and in fact are plausibly expected to be worse should the one be killed, making it wrong. Others bite the bullet, maintaining that it would indeed be right to kill the one, in light of a powerful teleological theory of practical reason. The terms "consequentialist" and "non-consequentialist" (or "deontologist") are aptly used to structure this debate about how to act. Although there might in principle be some idiosyncratic moral theory grounded upon precepts that inform standard consequentialism that generates the same outcome as what we call "deontology", that would not be central (I do not suggest it would be downright irrelevant), since there would be zero disagreement about which choices are the right ones to make.

I suggest something similar about meaning, where much of the issue (though not all, on which see 2.1 above) is about how to live. Is there more meaning in a life that promotes a cause by working hard for it than by merely writing a cheque? Is there more meaning in a life that is, in Susan Wolf's influential terms,

“subjectively attracted” to a worthwhile project than one that were instead bored by it? It is these kinds of questions to which most theorists and of course nearly all interested laypeople want answers; they want to know whether meaning is available to them and how to impart it to their lives. And so “consequentialism” and “non-consequentialism/deontology” are aptly used to structure debate about that.

At one point Wells remarks, “The central problem remains that Metz fails to motivate his characterization of what it means for a theory to be consequentialist” (2015: 172). Implicit in the book was my view that taxonomy should be a function of what helps to organize debate about the most important issues. I take them to be about how one can live a life that has more meaning in it as opposed to less, whereas Wells instead is interested in abstract points about whether certain theoretical prescriptions are extensionally equivalent.

For all Wells has said, he has not yet provided any reason to doubt that meaning is adequately captured by the fundamentality theory. Even if some other theory could generate the same conclusions as it, and even if, as he points out, there would in principle be a way to choose between them on explanatory grounds (2015: 177), as things stand, his article does not require me to change anything; for he has not, as yet, suggested that a gimmicky consequentialism would offer an explanation that plausibly rivals the deontological fundamentality theory. Presumably it would not, if it is disconnected from the kind of perspectives that were invoked to question the standard, utilitarian and perfectionist forms of consequentialism.

4.3. Is Meaning Essentially Fundamental?

In his intricate contribution, David Matheson, like me (2013: 212, 219, 226, 230-231), runs with the suggestive characterizations of meaningfulness as a “deep” or “profound” value that contrasts with more shallow, superficial ones. In my work, I do so by appealing to fundamentality, the idea that substantial meaning comes from positively orienting one’s rational nature towards causally or explanatorily deep conditions of human life, roughly, those that account for much else about certain, major dimensions of it. Interestingly, Matheson believes that the spatial metaphor of depth (or, conversely, height as per Mintoff 2008: 81) in fact tells against my fundamentality theory. For him, meaning is deep insofar as it is essentially what he calls “extra-dimensional”, i.e., includes

some other value while expanding the amount of value overall, a property for which my theory fails to account. In the following, after I try to clarify these extremely abstract statements of extra-dimensionality and fundamentality, I mainly argue, *contra* Matheson, that meaning is not invariably extra-dimensional, which is a good thing, since I provide even more reason than he has to think that fundamentality cannot entail that it is.

According to Matheson, for meaning to be an extra-dimensional value means that it is essentially a good that (1) supervenes on (or is constituted by) another, logically distinct final good and that (2), upon doing so, realizes more final goodness on balance. For example, making a strenuous effort to help others and succeeding in making their lives go better is (1*) to exhibit moral worth but (2*) of a special sort where the value of meaning is present beyond that of morality. For another example, being the first to create a new type of poem would be (1#) to exhibit aesthetic value but (2#) of a special sort where the value of meaning is present beyond that of the artwork. Matheson provides several examples where intuitively meaningful conditions do exhibit these two properties, and so it makes sense for him to generalize, i.e., to posit the hypothesis that meaning always exhibits them.

Matheson has two additional reasons for contending that meaning is essentially extra-dimensional. One is that if it were, then he would have cashed out the spatial metaphor routinely associated with meaning-talk, viz., it would count as a “deep” value for being one that enriches some other value, for taking some other value deeper. Another is that extra-dimensionality would best explain the crises of meaning that people sometimes have. Even when their lives exhibit final values such as morality, enquiry and creativity (“the good, the true and the beautiful”), they can sensibly doubt whether they are worthwhile when the extra-ordinary value provided by meaning is lacking, or perceived to be.

Before considering whether my fundamentality theory of what makes a life (notably) meaningful can capture extra-dimensionality, I first provide reason to doubt that it should have to do so. While meaning often exhibits extra-dimensionality, it does not always, or so the following cases suggest. They are intended to be cases where there is plausibly meaning that does not involve “the realization to a certain degree of at least one of the more familiar forms of final value” (Matheson 2015: 21).

First off, consider a young person struck and killed by a drunk driver. Afterwards, her family puts signs up at the scene of the accident to warn people

that drunk driving kills, and more generally engages in activism by appeal to her death. Here, it is plausible to think that her death was not utterly pointless or that her life has had some real significance despite its brevity, at least supposing drunk driving is reduced as a result of her parents' efforts. However, it is implausible to characterize the meaning here in terms of moral value, or any other final good. To be sure, her parents have exhibited moral value, but she did not in virtue of her early death, and yet (some of) the meaning has accrued to her.

For a second case, think about grand master chess players (cf. Metz 2013: 165, 216, 223). It would be reasonable for one to deem one's life to be meaningful for having become a worldwide expert at this game. And yet it is hard to name what other final value might be involved. There are clearly certain mental capacities actualized, such as memory, analytical reasoning, concentration and the like, but these are not "familiar forms of final value", quite unlike the "moral or alethic or aesthetic or hedonic final value" (Matheson 2015: 22) that Matheson routinely invokes.

Thirdly, reflect on positive personal relationships, such as marriage (cf. Metz 2002b: 811, 2013: 204, 228, 249). Think not about why one might stay in a marriage, and thereby avoid breaking a vow and hence exhibiting moral disvalue that would reduce meaning. Instead, focus on why one might be inclined to get married. If there is meaning here, it lies in the willingness to make a promise in the first place, i.e. to commit to another person, or in the degree of emotional openness and attachment that would lead one to do so. Of course, loyalty and love are "final values", but my point is that they seem so in virtue of their meaningfulness, and not some other readily identifiable type of final value such as morality, happiness, health, art, knowledge or the like that Matheson discusses.¹²

In light of the above cases, I am not yet willing to sign onto the view that meaning is essentially extra-dimensional. Note that if meaning were often, but

¹² Fourth, and with more controversy than the previous cases, consider those who have had a major impact on the course of human history, where the influence is negative or neutral. Think about the possibility of Genghis Khan's life having had meaning in it by virtue of so many future people having been genetically related to him. Or consider the inclination of some philosophers to be willing to ascribe meaning to Adolf Hitler's life, sometimes simply in virtue of the enormous mess he made and the unintended good consequences that came of it in the form of the United Nations, the International Criminal Court or the European Union. I am much less confident there is genuine meaning in these cases; perhaps, as I have considered elsewhere (Metz 2002b: 803), they are instances of impact or what Robert Nozick calls "importance", in contrast to meaningfulness (1989: 171-178).

not always, extra-dimensional, that would probably be enough to capture the advantages Matheson suggested, viz., of being able to make sense of not only why meaning is plausibly deemed to be something deep, but also why people can have personal crises despite the presence of other final values in their lives.

I suspect Matheson is correct that my fundamentality theory cannot capture the claim that meaning is essentially extra-dimensional, but not so much for the reasons he provides. At the heart of his analysis is the interpretation of fundamentality as being about the conditions of human life as such, not any of particular human's life or human society. His key cases are ones in which one weakly promotes something fundamental with regard to human life in general as compared to robustly promotes something fundamental to a particular human or subset of humans. He claims that since there is intuitively comparable value in the pairs of cases, the fundamentality theory cannot account for extra-dimensionality insofar as it involves a greater degree of final value overall upon the presence of meaning.

Matheson is not being uncharitable to read my discussion of fundamentality in this way, as I in *Meaning in Life* most often used examples where human life as such was the relevant object towards which an individual should contour her rationality so as to obtain great meaning. I spoke of supporting reasoning and relating as conditions fundamental to the course of a typical human life; I addressed reproduction, labour, communication, religion, love and natural selection as conditions fundamental to the course of a human society; and I characterized knowing about space-time, gravity and causation as about conditions fundamental to the human environment.

However, I did not intend the relevant object to be solely the general; some notable meaning could come from positively orienting one's rational self towards fundamental features of particular human beings or societies. There were occasions in the book where I pointed this out (e.g., 2013: 216, 226, 228, 230), but it was not admittedly the dominant motif, given my focus on quintessentially meaningful lives such as those of Mandela, Mother Teresa, Picasso, Dostoyevsky, Einstein and Darwin. In recent work I have said more about what it would mean to relate positively to the fundamental features of a subset of humanity such as a person, contending that love of another is intuitively meaningful when directed towards his "deep" features, i.e., his character or what makes him tick, and not merely his more surface properties such as his appearance (Metz 2014d: 104-106).

By my actual view, then, one would have to compare the intensity of the available contouring of one's rational self and the degree of expected outcome, on the one hand, with the extent of influence, on the other, in order to know how best to realize meaning in one's life. If one could do a lot for the fundamental conditions of humanity, or a broad swathe of it, there would be prima facie reasons of meaning to do that, even if at the expense of family, as Mandela elected to do. If, however, one were not in a position to do a lot for humanity, but do could something substantial for the fundamental conditions of the life of one's spouse, considerations of meaning could well counsel the latter.

What I suspect is the deeper (so to speak) incompatibility between extra-dimensionality and fundamentality is that the latter is not always intuitively finally good. Trying to be charitable to me, Matheson at one point says, "I take it, moreover, that Metz intends the fundamental conditions to be fundamentally good ones, or at least not fundamentally bad ones" (2015: 27). However, the view in the book, and the view I still hold, is that some fundamental conditions are "neutral" or even "bad" but could be sources of meaning all the same upon contouring one's rational nature towards them.

The best examples are in the realm of knowledge (Metz 2013: esp. 209, 229, 249). Knowledge about gravity, quarks and light is not about anything good for its own sake, but these are properties that are responsible for, or account for, much else about the environment in which we live, such that discovering facts about them conferred meaning on the lives of natural scientists. And then much of the course of human development has been a function of, and explained by, neurosis, xenophobia and war, which are also not good for their own sake, but revealing facts about them conferred meaning on the lives of social scientists (and novelists, too).

In all, Matheson is probably correct in the final analysis that fundamentality cannot capture extra-dimensionality. However, I would at this point invite the reader to view these cases of intuitively meaningful kinds of knowledge to be further counterexamples to Matheson's extra-dimensionality thesis, so that one should favour fundamentality if one must choose between it and extra-dimensionality.

In his contribution, Minao Kukita also provides reason to question fundamentality as exhaustive of great meaning in life, when it comes to poetry. *Meaning in Life* addressed aesthetic themes, as one dimension of the classic triad of "the good, the true and the beautiful" in the Western tradition. In that

tradition, when trying to differentiate great art from the not so great, it has been standard to maintain that the former is about universal themes, topics that transcend a particular culture, even if expressed in its terms (cf. Metz 2013: 215, 230). I objected to that view on the ground that certain universal themes are intuitively trivial. As an alternative, I suggested that the relevant sub-set of universal themes that are not trivial are those concerning fundamentality, i.e., those addressing conditions of human life largely responsible for the course of typical human lives. That concept, I proposed, is what best captures themes such as character, neurosis, love, morality, family, death, crime, vengeance and the like.

Kukita finds it much too narrow to deem fundamental theme to be a necessary condition for great art, particularly in light of the Eastern aesthetic tradition. More specifically, he appeals to the Japanese poetic form of haiku to suggest that fundamentality is too strict a criterion for art that confers substantial meaning on the artist's life. Kukita's key remarks are here:

For example, the most famous and popular work of haiku ... is simply about the sound of a frog jumping into a pond ('An old pond, the sound of a frog jumping into it'). The author, Basho Matsuo, also wrote a piece of haiku about the urine of a horse ('Fleas, lice, a horse urinating near my pillow'). According to Metz, these haiku are not about fundamental conditions of human existence, and therefore, do not pass as great art.... I am afraid that there are many other artworks that are apparently about unimportant things but that are nonetheless viewed as great art (2015: 211, 212).

In the book, I felt on shaky ground when discussing aesthetics, but was there particularly concerned that the fundamentality theory could not account well for non-representational works (2013: 231). The force of Kukita's terrific, famous examples is that they are representational works, have often been deemed to be great, but do not appear to be about something fundamental to the human condition.

The strongest way for me to reply is to contend that excellent haiku in general, and the particular instances from Basho, are in fact about fundamental

facets of human life.¹³ A quick perusal of the literature on haiku characterizes it as prompting deep emotions and expressing universal themes of human existence through simple images. Fundamentality promises to capture the core of these ideas.

Consider the specific instances above. Kukita's translation of the haiku about a horse urinating does not readily express in English what many others have felt upon reading the poem, namely, experiences of poverty, irritation, frustration and loneliness, all of which are strong motivations in characteristic human life and hence influence a wide array of other experiences. And then the haiku about the sound of a frog having jumped into a pond prompts awareness of, say, the experience of being absorbed by nature. Or it might occasion reflection on change or animation, viz., a still and quiet body of water being shifted by the movement of a being with an inner life. In short, I suspect that Kukita is not giving Basho his due when he says, "(T)he above-mentioned haiku are apparently representational and about nothing other than an old pond, a frog, flea, lice and a horse urinating" (2015: 212).

Suppose, however, that I and other interpreters are reading too much into these haiku. Or consider that, even if we are not, there are other haiku that are indeed about intuitively superficial topics but that are great all the same. I would naturally like to be able to inspect alleged specimens of the latter, but suppose, for now, that they could be produced. Then, I would propose a weaker position: even if being about a fundamental theme is not necessary for a work of art to be great and to confer substantial meaning on the artist's life, it is *characteristic* of great art to be about what is fundamental to the course of human life. Such a view, perhaps as extended beyond the beautiful to include the good and the true, would, I hope, still be a novel and revealing position.

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¹³ I am grateful to Reza Hosseini for pushing me to take this reply seriously.

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